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## An Invasion of Chipping Sparrows

Vernon M. Kleen

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## An Invasion of Chipping Sparrows

This spring (2013) Illinois experienced its second atypical spring in a row. Spring 2012 arrived early with several 80° F days in late March followed by an extended cold spell in April. These conditions were good for neither birds nor vegetation. Spring 2013 was very wet, cool and late – basically, just the opposite of spring 2012. To add to the scenario, a record-setting, late-season, snow-storm dumped 17" of wet snow in Springfield (central Illinois) on 24 Mar. These conditions, likewise, were good for neither birds nor vegetation. This information is provided simply for reference purposes because it probably has nothing to do with this year's atypical "invasion" of Chipping Sparrows.

Chipping Sparrows typically arrive at my home feeding (and banding) station in early April; until their 31 Mar 2013 arrival, the earliest arrival had been 6 Apr; median arrival date (for 13 yr) is 12 Apr and the latest is 26 Apr.

Each year, on 1 Jan or soon thereafter, banding begins in my suburban backyard with birds captured in a single, walk-in, all-purpose, figure-8, ground trap on my back patio (see pp. 112-114 in McClure, E., 1984, *Bird Banding*, Boxwood Press, Pacific Grove, CA). My yard consists of a small concentration of medium-height trees and considerable lawn. Typical birds captured in the walk-in trap early in the season are Mourning Doves, Northern Cardinals, Slate-colored Juncos and House Finches. By late March, the species composition includes Common Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and migrant sparrows (American Tree, Song and White-throated). Then, in April, Chipping Sparrows and other species arrive.

Banding conditions and operations at home this spring were nearly identical to those of years past; therefore, there was no apparent reason why the trap should have been any different this spring for attracting Chipping Sparrows than any other year. Until 2008, the highest number of Chipping Sparrows banded in an entire year (all methods combined – including mist nets) was 21; in 2008

that highest number for a complete year increased to 57. This spring the number captured in that single backyard trap, from 31 Mar to 19 May was 141. And, for the record, another 66 were banded (captured in mist nets) at the local Bird Banding Station (11 miles away) between 3 Apr and 11 May.

During the period of 31 Mar through 19 May, only 62 other birds of nine species were captured in the trap (seven of which were return birds of previous years – and one of these was a Chipping Sparrow); therefore, 72% of all unbanded birds captured in the trap this spring were Chipping Sparrows.

After two Chipping Sparrows were banded on 31 Mar, the next capture date was 8 Apr (seven birds), then one or more near daily through 30 Apr. May bandings included eight birds between 10 and 19 May. The maximum number banded on a single date (27) occurred on each of two consecutive days, 19 and 20 Apr; another 14 were banded on 21 Apr (for 68 in a three-day period). Interestingly, on these latter dates birds were entering the trap even when there was no evidence of food (primarily millet) in the trap.

Throughout this period, several birds were captured multiple times. At least 19 birds were recaptured the day after banding; 10 more were recaptured two days after banding. Two birds were recaptured seven days after banding and one was first recaptured on the 28th day after banding. Ten birds were captured as repeats the same day as banding, another 17 were captured as repeats at least two times after initial banding and one bird was recaptured five times after banding, the last time 25 days later.

The 66 birds captured in mist nets at the local Bird Banding Station do not provide near as interesting a story; however, they do add to the suggestion of a "Chipping Sparrow invasion" this year.

**Vernon M. Kleen** (08355)  
1825 Clearview Drive  
Springfield, IL 62704